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The Year of the Spy

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Has the KGB been so successful in breaking up American intelligence operations in Moscow in recent months that it has no real spies left to arrest?

The Russian conduct in bringing obviously trumped up accusations of spying against American journalist Nicholas Daniloff gives off an odor of such cynicism, for it comes at a time when the KGB has virtually eliminated covert American intelligence-gathering in Moscow.

Daniloff has almost certainly been caught up in the escalating war being fought by the superpowers' secret services. That war in turn is becoming a national security problem for the United States that some European intelligence specialists fear is receiving too little attention in Washington.

The damage that has been inflicted on Central Intelligence Agency operations in Moscow may take years to repair, according to these specialists, who are troubled by the ease with which the KGB has rolled up so many American operations in Moscow in this Year of the Spy.

For understandable reasons, the CIA has not been eager to publicize the Soviet counterespionage successes. Some of this, however, has surfaced through the quiet expulsion of at least three U.S. diplomats in the past year and the reported arrest of two Soviet citizens on espionage charges. But intelligence professionals fear that the agency may not be prepared to acknowledge even internally the magnitude of the problems it now faces in its Soviet operations.

Seen from abroad, the scorecard of this extraordinary season of defections, trials and disclosures in the world of espionage seems now to be tilting in favor of the Soviets, who have been able to oust active, in-place American agents working on current intelligence missions.

This is true despite the major coup the western intelligence community scored in the spring of 1985 with the defection to Britain of Oleg Gordievsky, the KGB's London station chief.

The Gordievsky success and the euphoria it produced in London and Washington may have carried with it the seeds of the later problems.

Moreover, the highly personal involvement of CIA director William J. Casey in the Gordievsky case may inhibit a thorough internal probe of its relationship to the still-mysterious defection and redefection of another KGB official last year, Vitaly S. Yurchenko. As Murrey Marder recently disclosed in The Washington Post, Gordievsky provided the British, and through them the Reagan administration, with extraordinarily valuable intelligence. Casey personally debriefed him to prepare President Reagan for the summit in Geneva last year, these experts confirm.

Gordievsky's defection would have set off alarm bells throughout the Kremlin last summer. It now appears increasingly likely that the Soviets reacted with uncharacteristic speed and skill in dispatching Yurchenko last summer as a fake defector whose mission was both to muddy the waters and to assess the damage Gordievsky was causing to Soviet intelligence.

Having had special access to Gordievsky, the CIA could hardly turn aside British requests to put questions to Yurchenko. Despite some misgivings in the U.S. intelligence organization about what Yurchenko might deduce about allied counterintelligence work from those questions, the British request was honored.

Yurchenko's actual role remains controversial among intelligence professionals, a development the Soviets are likely to view with some satisfaction.

"They would never want the argument about whether Yurchenko was a plant or a real agent to be settled definitely," says a counterintelligence expert in Europe. "It is much more valuable to have the Americans arguing about whether defectors can be trusted or not than knowing for sure."

To establish his bona fides, Yurchenko apparently fingered Ronald W. Pelton and Edward Lee Howard, two former U.S. intelligence officers who were burnt assets by mid-1985, since they had no current intelligence information to offer the Soviets.

Pelton was tried and convicted of espionage. But Howard was able to make it to the Soviet Union, where he was granted asylum last month.

Intelligence professionals in Europe doubt that Howard possessed enough detailed or current information about Moscow operations to account for the recent Soviet crackdown on U.S. agents and their Soviet contacts.

That leaves them asking what has happened in Moscow and hoping the agency will not once again short-circuit internal efforts to answer that question and to pull together the loose strands that could, when joined, explain the Year of the Spy.